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# Technology and *The Social Contract*: Is a Direct Democracy Possible Today?

By Hope Swedeen, Class of 2016

## ABSTRACT

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Social Contract addresses the viability of direct democracy, and he expresses several truths still apparent today, including the value of a direct rather than representative system and its ability to create and ensure the protection of equality. He lists the determination of a general will as a stipulation of direct democracy, upon which he says political decisions should be made. This paper is a response to Rousseau's notion that direct democracy is ineffectual in a state with a large population. It looks to technology as a means of understanding how direct democracy may be more possible today despite Rousseau's three main contentions that distance, diversity, and the impossibility of determining the general will would make democracy ineffectual. First, I argue that technology is able to connect people across vast distances, eliminating Rousseau's distance-related objection. Second, although Rousseau contends that diversity hinders direct democracy because citizens are not capable of discerning the general

will of populations with varied and unfamiliar views, technology has made diversity more visible than ever. We are therefore able to identify a general will through the study and understanding of others' ideologies despite increased diversity. Determining the general will is now more possible than ever because, with the advancement of technology, people are in constant communication. Finally, I assert that, contrary to Rousseau's view, direct democracy is more likely to succeed in a largely populated state because modern technology allows its users to cross divides, fostering and disseminating communities of ideas within and across nations.

## **TECHNOLOGY AND *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT***

Several philosophers have theorized that without government, humankind would be intrinsically trapped within a "state of nature." This "state," as it were, is argued to be without law or order and is at the root of humanity's need for government rule. It is through the creation of government, philosophers have argued, that humanity is liberated from its natural state that is without freedoms and transplanted into a harmonious existence in which freedom is guaranteed. In Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract*, this notion goes further and calls for a more equitable distribution of these freedoms through the creation of direct democracies. That said, Rousseau contends that a direct democracy is only possible in states with relatively small populations; he would therefore think it impossible for a nation such as the United States to achieve a system of direct democracy, the only truly democratic form of democracy,

because of the sheer vastness of its population. However, in recent years, the potential for this contention to be disproved has increased dramatically as the world has embraced and capitalized on technological advancements. Although the population of the United States is several times larger than what Rousseau presumed would be an optimum size for direct democracy, the number of people and the immense distance between them has become less of a hindrance to the democratic process than it may have been in the past because of technology's ability to connect previously isolated individuals. Because of technology, direct democracy could be more practical today than ever before despite Rousseau's claim that it cannot function in a largely populated state. In fact, a direct democracy might now be even more effective than electoral democracy in a state that does have a larger population, such as the United States, because of the growing access to and use of technology.

To begin *The Social Contract*, Rousseau speaks to the original state of humanity, which he explains as a "state of nature," a state that does not and cannot allow for satisfactory freedoms. Although we are forever free to do as we please as individuals within the state of nature, we are not free from the wills of other individuals. In Rousseau's words, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" (2008, 14). Rousseau's remedy to this state of alienable freedoms is government, as he believes that the only way to be truly free is to conform to a social order that will ensure the freedoms of all to live peacefully. He states, "The social order is a sacred right which is the basis of all other rights.

Nevertheless, this right does not come from nature, and must therefore be founded on conventions” (Rousseau 2008, 14), as “conventions form the basis of all legitimate authority among men” (Rousseau 2008, 17). According to Rousseau, before humans are thrust into a government-ruled society, we lack the freedom to pursue morality in our actions because we are constrained by our needs and the threat of others’ individual needs being prioritized over our own. Through the formation of a civil state, then, Rousseau contends that humans gain “moral liberty, which alone makes him truly master of himself; for the mere impulse of appetite is slavery, while obedience to a law which we prescribe to ourselves is liberty” (2008, 28). It is through convention and government, therefore, that we become truly free as individuals, though, paradoxically, we are constrained by the rule of our government’s laws and “forced to be free” (Rousseau 2008, 27).

In order to address this paradox, Rousseau commits to illustrating the ideal form of government throughout *The Social Contract*. He says,

The problem is to find a form of association which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before. (Rousseau 2008, 23)

For Rousseau, the only government that can create true freedoms, where all people can act within the confines of the

state but still freely operate as individuals, is a direct democracy. In a direct democracy, Rousseau argues, the people are free to govern themselves, having a direct say in their government's decisions. Although they are making collective decisions, they are free individuals with freedoms guaranteed to them by the state. The people therefore are entrusted with the ability to create greater equality in the distribution of freedoms that are ensured by the state, and because they are working as a collective body, they cannot make decisions that would usurp the freedom of any citizen (Rousseau 2008, 26).

This collective decision-making is what Rousseau calls the "general will," which he describes in detail as being a will that is somewhat "universal," or the most popular will, and must be followed by all within the state so that everyone may live harmoniously. Although the general will is not initially universally known, through voting, we can determine the general will and act accordingly. Rousseau says, "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole" (2008, 24). Whether to obey the general will is not so much a matter of choice as a matter of pertinence. According to Rousseau, "Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free" (2008, 27).

Although Rousseau does hold that a democracy is the ideal form of statehood for a free body of people, he makes it clear that there must remain a distinction between direct and electoral democracy and that only through direct democracy can the people within it be truly free. As previously established, without freedom, Rousseau contends that humans are immoral, basing decisions not on what is best but on what is necessary for their individual survival, and therefore self-governance as the only means to achieve true freedom. Therefore, by giving up the right to directly determine our laws, we give up our freedom, or, as Rousseau says, we give up the basic need and duty of humanity. Rousseau contends,

To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties. For him who renounces everything no indemnity is possible. Such a renunciation is incomparable with man's nature; to remove all liberty from his will is to remove all morality from his acts. (2008, 18)

In other words, by consenting to be governed by an elected body, adopting a representative democracy, people give up their freedoms to the will of others. These people, chosen to represent the people, cannot know the general will and would not be obligated to act upon the general will were it made apparent to them. Instead, they act upon the individual wills of the people, arguing for and setting laws based on individual or group beliefs and values rather than making

decisions that are a representation of the general population's will.

Therefore, an electoral, or representative democracy, according to Rousseau, is nothing less than a dehumanizing form of slavery, subjecting the people to the will of the few. He says, "The moment a people allows itself to be represented, it is no longer free" (2008, 96). A direct democracy, then, is the best form of government, in Rousseau's eyes, as it allows for true freedom of the people, a unified society, and a harmonious existence that is not created through oppression but through understanding of the will of the collective body politic. Even still, Rousseau finds issue in this assertion that a direct democracy is the most ideal form of government, as he acknowledges that direct democracies are limited in their capabilities based on the potential for diversity in the makeup of a state itself. In some states, Rousseau would not view direct democracy as ideal and would contrastingly suggest that it is rather impossible. The United States would fall into this realm, as Rousseau would certainly believe that the creation of a truly direct democracy in the United States would be physically impracticable.

For Rousseau, a direct democracy is only practical in a geographically small state with a small, unified population. In a large population, Rousseau says that liberties are lost as people lose the weight of their voice in government. Although he does say that "what makes the will general is less the number of voters than the common interest uniting



them,” this lends itself to the implication that a larger body of people cannot be united by this common interest (Rousseau 2008, 37). For Rousseau, the larger and more diverse a population becomes, the less practical a direct democracy will become as well because the people’s voices will be heard exponentially less as the number of people required to conform to the general will increases. So too, the number of notions of what the general will is will also grow with the population, and the body of people, intended to be one whole, will become segments based on individuals’ ideas of what the general will is. Rousseau says that it follows that the greater the number of people, the less influence an individual vote can have. He says, “If the people numbers a hundred thousand... his vote, being reduced to one hundred thousandth part, has ten times less influence... From this it follows that, the larger the State, the less the liberty” (2008, 61).

According to Rousseau,

In every body politic there is a maximum strength which it cannot exceed and which it only loses by increasing in size. Every extension of the social tie means its relaxation; and, generally speaking, a small State is stronger in proportion than a great one. (2008, 49-50)

For a direct democracy, this maximum strength must be very small, as Rousseau contends that if it is not, the population will become too great and diverse to be controlled by a single will, and therefore the executive branch of government,

meant to enforce the general will, must become larger so that it can extend to protect the freedoms of a larger population (Rousseau 2008, 62). In a smaller state, it is possible for the people to agree on laws and ways of life because they share geographical hardships and community ideals, beliefs, practices, and values. However, once this population becomes more diverse in all of these respects, Rousseau believes that the people can no longer govern themselves objectively and will begin to mistake the general will for their individual or community will (2008, 62).

It follows, then, that a direct democracy would either become tyrannical, taken over by the wills of one segment of the population, or would become an electoral democracy to make the democratic process more practical for a more expansive nation. If a democracy does become representative, the corporate will, or that which lies between the will of the people and the individual will, becomes most dominant, and pays less heed to the individual or general wills than is necessary for a state's functionality as an entity meant to be representative of its people. Rather, the executive government would become so powerful that it hinders the democratic process and does not allow for the general will to be known at all and determines the general will for itself (Rousseau 2008, 62).

Rousseau further supports his supposition that democracy is only practical in small states by addressing smaller, though not insignificant, challenges that a state would confront as it grows. One of these challenges,

Rousseau says, is distance. He says, “Long distances make administration more difficult” (2008, 50), and “the more the distance between people and government increases, the more burdensome tribute becomes” (2008, 80). He poses these points for a number of reasons. Firstly, it would be difficult for a community to gather and discuss its laws if that society is spread out across thousands of miles and there are millions of people to be assembled. This form of gathering would be both impossible and time-consuming, as the people would need to travel to one spot at the same time. Given the fact that so many people cannot physically fit into one space, let alone be heard or listened to, a direct democratic discussion would seem impossible for a state as large as the United States. Further, determining a vote count when every individual is casting a vote would be impossible, according to Rousseau’s notion of democratic proceedings. The process of voting, in its entirety, then, would be impossible, by Rousseau’s account, in a large state.

He also contends that it would be impractical and not merely impossible, as the greater the distance between people meant to participate in a direct democracy, the greater the cost to the state becomes (2008, 50). With each person expected to gather for a democratic proceeding, their profits for their days, weeks, or months of absence would be too large to be acceptable, and there is no solution to this problem other than to exclude certain citizens from the voting process or make use of absentee ballots. Though, with absentee ballots comes the issue of a lack of participation in determining the general will, as one cannot

be involved in the group conversation that would make that will clearer to all.

Rousseau's assertions that direct democracy cannot function within a largely populated state are by no means unfounded. It is logical to suppose that as the population grows and becomes more diverse, the general will may become more convoluted. It is also true that this would likely cause breaks in the sovereign people, as a whole, creating segmented interest groups that mistake their individual wills for the general will and who therefore wish to popularize that will. In this instance, Rousseau's contention that a larger, more powerful executive government would be created is a possibility of the likeliest kind simply because the number of people who do not believe in the legitimacy of the general will would surely increase along with the population and diverse ideals. The people, then, would indeed need to be "forced to be free" by the executive branch if they were to attempt to cast off the general will.

However, this, as Rousseau notes, would lead to an executive government that, if too powerful, could also ignore the general will and operate based on its own conclusions of what is best for the State. Rousseau makes it clear that the government, if left to make decisions on behalf of the people, would not conform to the general will, and he states:

The general will is always weakest, the corporate will second, and the individual will strongest of all; so that, in the government, each member is first of all

himself, then a magistrate, and then a citizen – in an order exactly the reverse of what the social system requires. (2008, 65)

Although all of Rousseau's points hold merit to some degree, it cannot be said that he is entirely correct or that his ideas are all applicable in today's society. It is still true that without a system of government, humanity is not free. We can see in political or religious groups who have no established state or formal government that without legitimacy in statehood, people cannot always function as human beings should. They are not free. In areas controlled by terror organizations, such as ISIS, there is no freedom. There is no protection from the will of one or of the few. To this extent, Rousseau's contention that freedom can only be achieved through statehood is still applicable today. Further, his demand for a direct, rather than representative democracy also has merits within contemporary contexts, as it is true that the people of the United States are not truly free to govern themselves and are demanding more control over their own governance every day. The applicability of Rousseau's theory to today's world ends here.

Because of modern technological advancements, and the advancements in the uses of these technologies, society has become fit to lend itself to a direct democracy in the United States and perhaps globally. In the modern world, Rousseau's assertion that direct democracy will fail under the pressures of a large population cannot hold true. It cannot be said that with current technology, the large

population of the United States would make direct democracy impossible despite any claims Rousseau makes to the contrary. Rousseau addresses three main points in relationship to a large population's impact on the success of direct democracy, which relate to distance, diversity, and the general will. In reference to distance, Rousseau says that as the population grows, so too does the geographical space between people, and this causes an inability of the sovereign body to work as a collective on voting and determining the general will. However, today, distance between people does not create obstacles in the processes of voting and discussion. Technology spans the geographical divides of our population, even the world, because through various mediums, all people can, in fact, be connected to one another nearly instantaneously. Using social media, people interact constantly wherever they are, and no matter how widespread the populace has become, people have found ways to communicate and discuss government action all over the United States, and indeed all over the world.

Rousseau's second point regarding the increase in population addresses the growth of diversity within a larger, more wide-spread populace leads into his third point regarding the general will. According to Rousseau, as a population diversifies, it becomes less possible for a general will to be determined or even to exist. Rousseau says that because we cannot identify with each individual who has needs that diverge from our own, we cannot formulate a general will, and we would be liable to mistake our own wills for the general will if we were to attempt to unite these

diverse individual wills. While this may have been true in Rousseau's time, when very little could be said for people's knowledge of those outside of their small communities or of people who did not often meet with wills counter to their own, it cannot be said to hold true today considering the drastic differences in society and the advancements in the functionality, access, and operation of technology. People are now capable of creating a digital presentation of themselves through social media technologies like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, sharing their identities, thoughts, ideas, and questions. Because users are encouraged to share their own stories and ideas, as well as their names, there is substantially more access to information about the makeup of our population. The amount of diversity, while very high, as Rousseau suggests it should be in larger populations, is visible. We can therefore study it, grow to understand it, and engage with it so that, rather than creating divides, diversity unites people within a nation and around the world.

Moreover, it seems that rather than being separate from the individual will, the general will is instead informed by it. It would be impractical for individuals to give up their own concerns to determine the concerns or will of the populous as a whole; furthermore, when determining what is in the best interest of all, an individual's understanding of a "best interest" would naturally be shaped by one's individual ideas of what is "best" and how these interests can be served. It seems more likely, then, that the individual will does not remove itself from the general will but rather informs and creates the general will, as Rousseau upholds the individual

will as the strongest form, and this is true, especially in the United States (2008, 65).

It could then be concluded that Rousseau is right in thinking that a plethora of individual wills brought on by a larger population would, in fact, make direct democracy less practicable. However, again, technology has made this concern inviable, and it has, perhaps, turned what would once have made direct democracy impracticable – a large population – into rather an aide of the model. For, as the population grows, the community of ideas expands and provides each person greater insight into the thoughts and wills of others, letting these inform their own wills and ideals. Technology, then, can help inform us, through a social context, of other individual wills, and it provides a platform for discussion and compromise, and thereby creation of the general will. Simply put, through accelerated and mediated social interaction, made possible by advanced technology, we, as a population, have the direct ability to create and maintain the functional general will by which our lives can be ruled despite Rousseau's contention that the general will must be free from the influence of individual wills.

In modern times, society is in a state of constant connectivity. When once there was a limit to how far the internet could extend, it is now available via Wi-Fi, through data plans, and with mobile hotspots. Connectivity is everywhere, and people have begun to turn this connectivity into connectedness. We are using social media to talk about



current events, sharing opinions and being exposed to the ideas of others. We are watching videos of news broadcasts, satirical television shows, and dialogues between people with diverse views of the world and the United States. We are hearing opinions on the radio, and we are hearing music that has been chosen, by general consensus, to be “today’s hits.” All of our surroundings, all of our internet activity and use of technology, is working to demonstrate the views of those with whom we do not necessarily identify. We are seeing the perspectives of everyone across the country, and in the world, and whether intentionally or not, we are exposed to the wills and ways of living that are alike and in contrast to our own. Whether people feel positively or negatively about others’ ways of life, it is impossible to be ignorant of their existence or be wholly unaffected by their place in the world or our society.

There are blog posts, alternative news feeds, and social movements advertised on every social media platform that can shed light on the lives of people we might never have considered before. The distribution of news, via print, TV, radio, blogs, social media, and virtually any form of technology to be had, shows us parts of the world that we might have been strangers to five years or five days ago. The November, 2015 terror attacks in Paris have shown the potential of mass media, including social media, to disseminate news at previously unheard-of speeds and unite people all over the world. The climate of terror has helped to create a global discussion between people who are interested in looking outside of themselves to understand the

will of others, or what leads to people's actions, and understanding is found through virtual discussion using nearly every medium of technology. These attacks, and the swiftness with which the world is informed of them, creates a world-wide general will – to ensure that all people have the right to live outside of fear. Whether this is a practical will is irrelevant. It is a global, general will.

To say that there is no longer any hope of determining a general will among a population as large as the United States is no longer accurate. We have seen time and time again that the people of the United States, and of the world, can and will unite, not only in times of crisis but in instances of understanding and empathy in our daily lives. With the ability to travel on a whim, book flights, find a place to stay on websites like Airbnb, and reach virtually any destination in mere hours, we can no longer say that people do not have the ability to experience the lives of others. This is true also of social media, which gives us access to virtual illustrations of the stories and experiences that have shaped people's lives and their individual wills. These stories, in turn, shape us. We are no longer able to passively remain within our own sects of society, ignoring the lives or perspectives of those around us. Instead, technology has reduced the public and the world's acceptance of intolerance and ignorance. People are held to much higher standards than ever before in terms of education, compassion, open-mindedness, and compromise.

As the world has progressed in its use and sophistication of technology, unity, on a global scale, is now an achievable end, as technology connect individuals nationally and globally who have previously lived in relative solitude. In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau points to large populations as the downfall of an otherwise perfect system of government, direct democracy, because he believes that unity, or the consensus of a general will, cannot be achieved in large populations. He asserts that direct democracy is only possible in states with small, homogenous populations and that direct democracy would be impracticable and would become rather a representative, or electoral democracy because of a State's inability to cope with a large body of diverse individuals. A nation such as the United States, then, would be incapable of functioning under a direct democracy, according to Rousseau, simply because its population is too large to achieve unity. Because of technology, however, and the connectedness that it has created among people of the United States and worldwide, Rousseau's main point of concern – that the general will cannot be determined within a large population – is no longer valid.

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